THE PROMISE
December 12, 2010

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Psalm 23
Genesis 28:10–13, 15
Matthew 1:18–23

"Know that I am with you
and will keep you wherever you go."
Genesis 28: 15 (NRSV)

What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive
year after year in a world notorious for dashing
all hopes is the haunting dream that the child
who was born that day may yet be born again
even in us and our own snowbound,
snow-blind longing for him.

Frederick Buechner
"Emmanuel"
Secrets in the Dark

In this time of quiet waiting, give us patience,
and silence in us, on occasion, all the loud noise of the season
so that we might hear a word from you.
In this time of joyful anticipating and frantic preparing,
open our hearts and our minds to the majestic word of promise:
that in this birth, you come to be with us and to keep us forever. Amen.

I don't suppose we are the only people who tried valiantly to teach our children the true meaning of Christmas by trying to shield them from the excesses of the cultural celebration going on—and failed miserably: not at the true meaning of Christmas part, but at shielding them from the materialistic consumer, cultural celebration. That didn't work at all. In a fascinating new book, *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation,* Donald Heinz, Professor of Religious Studies and Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts at

California State University, observes that the lament on the part of Christians over the cultural captivity of Christmas, which Christians have always assumed was their private property, is as old as Christmas itself and has always failed.

Our personal attempt was, in retrospect, doomed to failure and naive. We also were determined to protect our children, particularly our sons, from the culture of violence, mayhem, destruction, and killing by not allowing them to have toy guns. That failed as well. I remember the occasion when we surrendered. They were chasing each other and faced off in the kitchen: the weapons they were cheerfully firing at each other were, I recall, a spatula and a wooden spoon. We broke out laughing. I went to the basement and fashioned two plywood rifles with a jigsaw, and the mayhem continued, now with almost respectable weapons.

We wanted them to understand that Christmas was about the birth of Jesus and God's love and that the true meaning had nothing to do with the cultural celebration: Frosty and Rudolph and, of course, Santa Claus, who brings gifts and toys in direct ratio to the child's compliant behavior. What, after all, does that have to do with the birth of Jesus? We simply didn't talk much about Santa, until we could no longer get around it. And then, as we did with guns, we surrendered. I had not yet read Donald Heinz's book, which chronicles the efforts of Christians, from the beginning, to separate themselves from the cultural year-end festivities, efforts which all failed and which ultimately were a mistake, Heinz says. In fact, Heinz calls the whole project a spectacular failure of theological imagination.

The efforts began in the early church and are the reason why December 25 was chosen as the date to celebrate Jesus' birth. Throughout the Roman Empire, the last week of the year was given over to Saturnalia, a weeklong festival of eating, drinking, and dancing. One of the few sermon titles and sermons I remember was preached by the Reverend Charles Leber, co-pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, where I worked and we worshiped when I was a student. Leber's sermon was "Another Roman Holiday," in which he said a modern American Christmas was similar to what happened in ancient Rome on December 25. Leber, who was a good preacher, had a grand time taking on Frosty, Rudolph, Jingle Bells, and Winter Wonderland as products of Madison Avenue and toy manufacturers. The Roman holiday had its roots in the earliest days of civilization. From time immemorial, the winter solstice has been a time of fear and awe and

celebration. As the sun moved further away and the days became shorter and darker and colder, ancient peoples devised rituals to persuade the sun to stop its retreat and to return. The deepening darkness and cold inspired terror that maybe the sun would not return and life would not be renewed. And so at the solstice, when the sun does stop its retreat and begin its long return, around December 21 in the modern calendar, ancient people in Mesopotamia celebrated with elaborate rituals and celebrations the return of order and light and warmth. Nordic and Celtic cultures, particularly in upper latitudes of the northern hemisphere where the diminishing of the light in late autumn is particularly dramatic, developed their own unique rituals to celebrate the renewal of life and fertility that the solstice promises. Some of those ancient customs and symbols are still with us: boughs of evergreen, holly and ivy, and wreaths.

In Rome, Saturnalia was a raucous, weeklong party, like Mardi Gras. Early Christians took a dim view of the eating and drinking and who knows what else and decided to have their own festival: Christ Mass, to celebrate the Incarnation, their—and our—central and most important idea and most precious event, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The hope was that Saturnalia, the cultural holiday, would be converted and redeemed by the religious holy day. That failed too. Now there were two celebrations at the same time, in a kind of tense coexistence, and they began to overlap. In the fourth century, the church launched an all-out assault on the secular festivities. It failed, too.

But nobody was as hard on Christmas as the Puritans. Heinz says the Puritans “argued that December 25 was not biblical, but heathen, that Jesus would have disapproved of his birthday celebration and that Christmas was just an excuse for gross behavior, social upheaval and drunkenness, no doubt aided by a lull in agricultural life” (p. 108).

In Puritan England, shops were ordered to remain open, work forced to go on, and no one was to light a holiday candle or eat holiday cakes. The Puritan parliament continued business as usual on Christmas Day from 1644 to 1656. In Scotland, John Knox had put an end to Christmas in 1562, and it wasn’t a nationally recognized legal holiday until the 1940s.

Following the Puritan period and Oliver Cromwell, when the British monarchy was restored, Christmas made a comeback in England. Heinz says it was not unlike the end of Prohibition here. But when the Puritans

came to America, they began again to try to rid the culture of Christmas and what they thought were its distractions and its pagan excesses. In Massachusetts, Christmas was illegal from 1659 to 1681. Congress was in session on December 25 from 1789 to 1851. Now the Puritans did a lot of good things, but their worldview was that good and evil are locked in battle, that the world is a corrupt and fallen place full of temptations, and that faithful Christianity means distancing oneself from everything that is worldly. The secular celebration of Christmas, with all its worldly delights, sensual, hedonistic pleasures, all that extravagant eating and drinking, not to mention clearly pagan customs like kissing under the mistletoe, seemed to the Puritans to be a particularly dangerous time, made all the worse by its adoption of the birth of Jesus as the reason for the celebration. It seemed blasphemous. The Puritan conclusion: do away with Christmas altogether.

It was not only a colossal failure as a strategy; Heinz says it was also a colossal "failure of theological imagination."

Our oldest and most important theology, shared by Christians and Jews, is that God's creation is good, not evil; that God is interested in this world, loves this world, and comes to be with us in this world.

In one of our oldest and most formative stories, Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, deceived his blind father and cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance and is now a fugitive, on the lam, fleeing from his furious brother. He's not on a meditative retreat in the wilderness. He's running for his life. He has no religious agenda; his only agenda is survival. He's not in a church or worship. He's out there in the world at its most dangerous and threatening, and it's dark, and he's exhausted. He sleeps on the ground. He could not be more vulnerable. In a dream he sees a ladder extending from heaven to earth and angels and the voice of God: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

That statement and these promises to be with and to keep are a game changer. Walter Brueggemann says they require a whole fresh and new idea of God. Most religious traditions agree that God is high and mighty, transcendent, and omnipotent, and that God is to be approached with great fear and trembling. But here is a God who descends, comes to be with a human being who is in a lot of trouble, worldly trouble, a human being who is afraid, trying to survive, and who could not be more vulnerable.

“I will be with you and will keep you”: it is the theological premise of the first prayer I learned and prayed every night: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

It is this world God comes into. It is into human life, raw, earthy, worldly human life, that God comes to be with and keep. The first hint of incarnation is here 2,000 years before Jesus, in this ancient story of a man on the run and God coming to be with him and keep him.

And so before we become too exercised about all the commercial excesses of Christmas, may we remember that incarnation happens in the world. That’s what incarnation, the very foundation of Christian faith, means: God with us; the Word, the essence of God, made flesh; God coming to be with us in the birth of a child. May we remember that the word that came to Jacob in a dream in the middle of the night—“I will be with you”—is the Hebrew word “Emmanuel,” a name by which we also know him, Jesus Christ.

Pay attention particularly to the fact that Jacob wasn’t doing anything religious, wasn’t praying or singing hymns. Pay attention to the fact that he wasn’t in a place where religious experiences are expected to happen, wasn’t in the temple, wasn’t at a sacred altar, wasn’t in church. In fact the place doesn’t even have a name until this incident. Pay attention to how worldly and unreligious Jacob’s current situation was: his fleeing for his life after lying to his father and cheating his brother. And pay attention to how vulnerable he is: asleep, not in control. That’s where and when and how this God comes: unplanned, unexpected, in the dark night of the soul when we are most vulnerable, out of options and frightened. That’s exactly when God comes to be with us and keep us.

We’ve all been in that place in one way or another. Recently I found myself thinking about an old spiritual I learned years ago:

> All night, all day,
> angels watchin’ over me, my Lord.
> All night, all day,
> angels watchin’ over me.

It’s a good little song to keep handy for the dark nights when you’re afraid. As are the psalmist’s words:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters. . . .

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me.

There it is again: the promise, Emmanuel.

Centuries later, St. Paul, writes to the church in Rome:

> Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword?

No, Paul wrote, nothing: neither death nor life, nothing present, nothing future. Nothing negates the promise of Emmanuel, God with us. Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It happened and happens in the world—the promise to Jacob and the event itself, the birth. We are so familiar with the story, it no longer startles us. But think about how unlikely, how unexpected, and how worldly, how very human it is:

- A pregnant, unwed teenager
- A, for obvious reasons, perplexed and anxious fiancé
- A long, arduous journey
- And then, upon arrival finally, no room; in an inn crowded with guests, drinking, eating, laughing
- The barn out back, the animals, the cows and sheep, the doves in the rafters; there had to have been cats and a dog
- The onset of labor, the pain, and then a newborn, a first cry, swaddling clothes she brought along
- A lullaby
- Then shepherds

It could not be more human, worldly, more earthy and that is exactly the point. Incarnation.
God with us means with us in the world, the sacred in the secular, the holy in the profane.

The miracle of Christmas, which we missed as young parents but now know, is that at the same time the secular becomes sacred, the Word becomes flesh, and God comes to be with us. The holy enters and affirms and blesses the human—all of it: journey; birth; young unmarried woman, heavily pregnant; faithful, steadfast man. All of it—all nature, cattle and sheep and shepherds and night sky full of stars, all of it, all the earth and earthiness, all humanity—is blessed and made holy by his being born into it.

And so I have come full circle, and I invite you to come along.

What is going on out there is not a contradiction of the true meaning of Christmas, not all of it, not at all. He was born into it. God comes into it and blesses it with holy love—all the happiness, all the reenergized hope for peace on earth and justice for all God’s children, all the love shared with family and friends, all the generosity and impulse to give, the giving, the receiving, all the color and music and bells and joy and singing and laughter.

Christmas, incarnation, the promise—God with us.

Amen.